

Chapter Two -- "Rock-a-bye Baby"

There I've written a whole chapter without a song, and that's longer than I've ever been without one since I can remember -- even if it is a short chapter.

Singing came early with us. We couldn't have been very old before Mother started singing us to sleep. She rocked us as she sang, either in a cradle or on her lap in the rockin' chair.

Some of the songs were lullabies and others weren't. Most any kind of song is good for putting a baby to sleep, if it isn't too loud. (I mean the song, not the baby, but that might have something to do with things, too.) She sang a lot of songs you'd find in books, but she sang others that had come down in the family for generations. One favorite was:

Rock-a-bye, baby, and this is the lady

That caused the poor child to cry.

The child fell a-weeping, for the want of good keeping,

So rock-a-bye, baby, oh, bye.

Such a lullaby may sound strange to folks who weren't raised in the mountains, but if you look at mountain songs you may see that most of 'em are gently poking fun at something. Nothing is too sacred -- not even religion -- for us mountaineers to chuckle over.

I'm sorry for the new-fangled babies that never get to be

rocked in cradles and sung to. It must be a drab life with nothing but pabulum, play-pens and panties.

Most of us children would be quiet for any song Mother would sing, but my sister Shirley was different. Before she could talk so you could understand her, she'd yell for some special song, and yell till she got it. Often the only way was to keep trying till Mother hit the right one. You could tell when that was, because the noise would stop.

One day Sis started yelling that she wanted "Hoddy New Ibben." There just didn't seem to be such a song. Mother sang herself hoarse, and Shirley screamed herself hoarse before Mom finally remembered that she had taken the kid to a funeral the day before, where they sang a doleful dirge which began:

"O mourner, bowed down o'er the sod newly riven."

That was it, and when it was sung, everything was hunky dory.

There were other lullabies, too. Familiar ones that everybody knows, like "Rock-a-bye Baby, in the Tree Top," and "Bye-O Baby Bunting", and "Sleep, Baby, Sleep." But there were livelier songs, like:

What'll we do with the baby-o?
 What'll we do with the baby-o?
 Wrap him up in calico,
 And send him down to Georgia-o.

They weren't meant to put the baby to sleep, but to keep

him happy. I have no brighter memories than when Dad bounced me on his knee and sang the old song Grandpa Swetnam had sung to him when he was a baby just after the War:

Howdy, Uncle Billy, and it's howdy, Aunt Kate.

Happy little ducky from the North Carolina state.

Happy little ducky, and I'll have you for to know,

Charming all the people, as up street I go.

Happy little ducky, and I'll have you for to know,

She is my sugar plum ~~plum~~.

You don't think your young-un would like it? Well if he's not past four, just set him on your knee and beat time with your heel not quite letting it touch the floor. Mine go for it, anyway.

If your baby is little -- say under a year and a half -- he'll like the old Jumping Song. Take him under the arms with both hands, and swing him up from your lap and down to it, while you sing:

Jumping Joan is never at home;

He's gone to his plantation,

To get some potatoes, to make him a mess,

To feed his Irish nation.

Some of the old songs for children must have come down from the frontier days; like:

Fry a little meat and make a little gravy;
 Nobody home but Pappy and the baby.
 Pappy was drunk and the baby was sober;
 Pappy gave a bump and knocked the baby over.

Mother never quite approved of that kind, but Dad sang 'em with gusto, and we liked to hear them. That was after the cradle days, and even after the cradle had been sold with fear and trembling. For every mountaineer knows if you sell the cradle there's nearly sure to be another baby along, right away.

Mountaineers remember those things, and if we don't take them too seriously, still we don't flout them too much. They may come in handy, like the old belief that a person who has never seen his father can cure thrush by blowing in a baby's mouth. Thrush is caused by a fungus, doctors tell us now, and causes a child's mouth to turn white inside.

Grandma Stafford's father had been drowned rafting logs before she was born, and when I got thrush she only laughed at Mother's worry and blew in my mouth. Mother didn't quite believe it would work, even later, but admitted the thrush did get well, right away.

Most of the lullabies were short, because little babies don't have very long memories, anyway. After we got a little older, there were longer songs, still tuned to a young-un's mind and his voice. We loved:

Oh, where have you been, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?

Oh, where have you been, Charming Billy?

I've been to see my wife; she's the joy of my life.
She's a young thing, and cannot leave her mammy.

How old is she, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?

How old is she, Charming Billy?

Twice six, twice seven, twice twenty and eleven.
She's a young thing, and cannot leave her mammy.

How tall is she, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?

How tall is she, Charming Billy?

She's as tall as a pine, and as slim as a punkin vine.
She's a young thing, and cannot leave her mammy.

Did she ask you to come in, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?

Did she ask you to come in, Charming Billy?

Yes she asked me to come in, with a dimple in her chin.
She's a young thing, and cannot leave her mammy.

Can she bake a cherry pie, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?

Can she bake a cherry pie, Charming Billy?

She can bake a cherry pie, quick as a cat can wink its eye.
She's a young thing, and cannot leave her mammy.

Did she set for you a chair, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?

Did she set for you a chair, Charming Billy?

Yes she set for me a chair, but the bottom wasn't there.
She's a young thing, and cannot leave her mammy.

Can she walk a plank fence, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?
Can she walk a plank fence, Charming Billy?

She can walk a plank fence, but she's got more sense.
She's a young thing, and cannot leave her mammy.

I'm pretty sure that last verse was added by someone in our own family. In case you've never seen a plank fence, it was made by nailing planks -- usually three levels -- from post to post. The top one made a fair substitute for a tight wire if we wanted to try a balancing act, but when balance failed it was jump quick or get a bad fall!

As far back as I can remember, one of our favorites was "Froggy Went A-Courtin'," a song that children all over America have sung for generations in thousands of variations. Here's how we sang it:

Froggy went a-courtin', he did ride, H'm, h'mmmmm.
Froggy went a-courtin', he did ride,
Sword an' a pistol by his side, H'm, h'mmmmm.

Refrain --

Kimebo, kamebo, fleeto flaro,
Hey to my rattle-trap,
Flemidoodle yaller-bug,
Rinktun, bottom inch akimebo.

Oh, Lady Mouse, are you within? H'm, h'mmmmm.

Oh, Lady Mouse, are you within?

Yes, kind sir, won't you come in? H'm, h'mmmmm.

Oh, Lady Mouse, will you be my bride? H'm, h'mmmmm.

Oh, Lady Mouse, will you be my bride?

And be forever at my side? H'm, h'mmmmm.

Oh, no, I cannot say to that, H'm, h'mmmmm.

Oh, no, I cannot say to that;

You'll have to speak to my uncle rat, H'm, h'mmmmm.

Uncle Ratty laughed and shook his fat side, H'm, h'mmmmm.

Uncle Ratty laughed and shook his fat side,

Saying, "Lady Mouse may be your bride, H'm, h'mmmmm.

Where shall the wedding dinner be? H'm, h'mmmmm.

Where shall the wedding dinner be?

Way down yonder in a green willow tree, H'm, h'mmmmm.

What shall the wedding dinner be? H'm, h'mmmmm.

What shall the wedding dinner be?

Two blue beans and a black-eyed pea, H'm, h'mmmmm.

The first one come in was a big bess-bug, H'm, h'mmmmm.

The first one come in was a big bess-bug,

Swore he'd fight for the gallon jug, H'm, h'mmmmm.

Next one come in was a bumble-bee, H'm, h'mmmmm.

Next one come in was a bumble-bee,

He had a fiddle on his knee, H'm, h'mmmmm.

And now the book is on the shelf, H'm, h'mmmmm.

And now the book is on the shelf,

If you want any more you can sing it yourself, H'm, h'mmmmm.

Small eyes widened, too, at the wonders of the land:

Away down south in Simmon street,

Sing-song Kitty, can't you ki-me-o;

That's where the niggus grow ten feet,

Sing-song Kitty, can't you ki-me-o.

Refrain:

Kimo, kamo, kimo, kee;

Way down yonder in a hollow tree;

With an owl and a bat and a bumble-bee;

Sing-song Kitty, can't you ki-me-o.

They go to bed, but it ain't no use

Sing-song Kitty, can't you ki-me-o;

Their feet hangs out for the chicken roost;

Sing-song Kitty, can't you ki-me-o.

Behind the barn, down on my knees,
 Sing-song Kitty, can't you ki-me-o;
 I thought I heard a chicken sneeze,
 Sing-song Kitty, can't you ki-me-o.

He sneezed so hard with the whoopin'-cough,
 Sing-song Kitty, can't you ki-me-o;
 He sneezed his head and his tail right off,
 Sing-song Kitty, can't you ki-me-o.

There were rigmaroles, too, as dear to our hearts as any
 song. For instance:

There was a man, and he went mad,
 And he jumped into a pea-swad. (pod)
 The pea-swad was over full,
 So he jumped into a roaring bull.
 The roaring bull was over fat,
 So he jumped into a gentleman's hat.
 The gentleman's hat was over fine,
 So he jumped into a bottle of wine.
 The bottle of wine was over dear,
 So he jumped into a barrel of beer.
 The barrel of beer was over thick,
 So he jumped into a club stick.
 The club stick was over narrow,
 So he jumped into a wheel-barrow.

The wheel-barrow began to crack,
So he jumped into a hay-stack.
The hay-stack began to blaze,
And he could do nothing but cough and sneeze.

That last rhyme sounds as if the rigmarole had come from Ireland. So, I think, had:

Old Mrs. McGuire,
She jumped in the fire.
The fire was so hot
She jumped in the pot.
The pot was so black
She jumped in the crack.
The crack was so high
She jumped in the sky.
The sky was so blue
She jumped in the canoe.
The canoe was so long
She jumped in the pond.
The pond was so shallow
She jumped in the tallow.
The tallow was so soft
She jumped in the loft.
The loft was so rotten
She jumped in the cotton.

The cotton was so white
She stayed there all night
And never got a bite
Till the next daylight.

Maybe those two came through my Grandma Swetnam, whose maiden name was Serena Patrick. I never thought to ask anyone about it till all the older generation were dead.

Maybe the family knew the next one, but I didn't learn it at home. It was picked up from the other boys when I started to school, down in Tennessee:

Went to the river an' I couldn' get across;
Paid five dollars for an ol' gray hoss.
Hoss wouldn't go;
Traded it for a hoe.
Hoe wouldn't dig;
Traded it for a pig.
Pig wouldn't squeal;
Traded it for a wheel.
Wheel wouldn't run;
Traded it for a gun.
Gun wouldn't shoot;
Traded it for a boot.
Boot wouldn't wear;
Traded it for a bear.

Bear wouldn't holler;
 Traded it for a dollar.
 Dollar wouldn't spend;
 Traded it for a hen.
 Hen wouldn't cluck;
 Traded it for a duck.
 Duck wouldn't quack,
 So I gave it back.

But the favorite of all the rigmaroles was the one we got
 when we would coax Mother: "Spell Abominable-Bumble-Bee-With-
 His-Tail-Cut-Off." Read it aloud fast, but not so fast you
 stumble.

Able-se-fay, and there's your A.
 B-o, bo, and there's your bo; and your A-bo.
 M-i, mi, and there's your mi; and your bo-mi, and your
 A-bo-mi.

N-a, na, and there's your na; and your mi-na, and your
 bo-mi-na, and your A-bo-mi-na.

B-e-double-l, bell, and there's your bell; and your na-bell,
 and your mi-na-bell, and your bo-mi-na-bell, and your A-bo-mi-na-
 bell.

B-u-m, bum, and there's your bum; and your bell-bum, and
 your na-bell-bum, and your mi-na-bell-bum, and your bo-mi-na-
 bell-bum, and your A-bo-mi-na-bell-bum.

B-e-double-l, bell, and there's your bell; and your bum-bell,

and your bell-bum-bell, and your na-bell-bum-bell, and your mi-na-bell-bum-bell, and your bo-mi-na-bell-bum-bell, and your A-bo-mi-na-bell-bum-bell.

B-double-e, bee, and there's your bee; and your bell-bee, and your bum-bell-bee, and your bell-bum-bell-bee, and your na-bell-bum-bell-bee, and your mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee, and your bo-mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee, and your A-bo-mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee.

W-i-t-h, with, and there's your with; and your bee-with, and your bell-bee-with, and your bum-bell-bee-with, and your bell-bum-bell-bee-with, and your na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with, and your mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with, and your bo-mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with, and your A-bo-mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with.

H-i-s, his, and there's your his; and your with-his, and your bee-with-his, and your bell-bee-with-his, and your bum-bell-bee-with-his, and your bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his, and your na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his, and your mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his, and your bo-mi-na-bell-bee-with-his, and your A-bo-mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his.

T-a-i-l, and there's your tail; and your his-tail, and your with-his-tail, and your bee-with-his-tail, and your bell-bee-with-his-tail, and your bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail, and your bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail, and your na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail, and your mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail, and your bo-mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail, and your A-bo-mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail.

C-u-t, cut, and there's your cut; and your tail-cut, and

your his-tail-cut, and your with-his-tail-cut, and your bee-with-his-tail-cut, and your bell-bell-with-his-tail-cut, and your bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut, and your bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut, and your na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut, and your mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut, and your bo-mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut, and your A-bo-mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut.

O-double-f, off, and there's your off; and your cut-off, and your tail-cut-off, and your his-tail-cut-off, and your with-his-tail-cut-off, and your bee-with-his-tail-cut-off, and your bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut-off, and your bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut-off, and your bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut-off, and your na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut-off, and your mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut-off, and your bo-mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut-off, and your A-bo-mi-na-bell-bum-bell-bee-with-his-tail-cut-off. And that's how you spell Abominable-Bumble-Bee-With-His-Tail-Cut-Off.

And if you've ever had the bad luck to get in the way of the business end of a big bumble bee, you'll know just why we loved to hear about one that couldn't sting us!